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# Promoting Community Leadership Among Community Foundations: The Role of the Social Capital Benchmark Survey

*Doug Easterling, Ph.D., Wake Forest University*

## Community Foundations and Community Leadership

The community foundation (CF) field has experienced a dramatic makeover in recent years. Rather than contenting themselves with excelling at the traditional functions of attracting donors, building endowments, and making grants, CFs have experimented with a variety of proactive community change strategies (Irvine Foundation, 2003; Hamilton, Parzen, & Brown, 2004; Ranghelli, 2006; McGill, Kornberg, & Johnson, 2007). These include:

1. publicizing issues that need more public and political attention;
2. drawing together various stakeholders to develop new solutions;
3. creating a new organization focused on a critical local issue;
4. developing, testing, and disseminating innovative program models;
5. advocating for changes in public policy and social norms;
6. encouraging people and organizations to adopt new practices; and
7. building the capacity of individuals, organizations, and communities.

## Key Points

- Faced with increased competition for donors and calls for measurable impact, many community foundations (CFs) are adopting a more proactive, strategic approach to philanthropy – one that has come to be known as "community leadership."
- Community leadership has proven challenging for many CFs. In theory, community assessment is a useful tool allowing CFs to identify strategic issues where leadership activities are warranted. This article examines the effect of a large, coordinated assessment project, the 2000 Social Capital Benchmark Survey (SCBS), conducted by Robert Putnam and the Saguaro Seminar at Harvard University.
- Of the 34 CFs that participated in SCBS, 12 participated in the National Social Capital Learning Circle from 2006-2007. Transcripts and materials generated through monthly conference calls were analyzed to assess the CFs' community-leadership work and to determine the role of SCBS.
- SCBS supported community leadership work by providing data that served as a platform for communitywide conversations, by pointing to strategic issues, and by providing objective evidence to justify the choice of issues.
- For CFs willing and able to serve as a community leader, a community assessment can serve as a useful point of departure for stepping first into facilitative leadership and later into more directive leadership.

The term "community leadership" has become the commonly accepted frame for this new line

of work. According to the Community Foundation Leadership Team (CFLT) at the Council on Foundations (2008), a community foundation becomes a “community leader” when it acts as “a catalyzing force that creates a better future for all by addressing the community’s most critical or persistent challenges, inclusively uniting people, institutions and resources, and producing significant, widely shared and lasting results” (p. 2).

*The overarching goal of community leadership is to improve the local community’s well-being in meaningful and measurable ways. By achieving a discernible community impact, a CF becomes a more responsible steward of its philanthropic assets.*

Lucy Bernholz, Katherine Fulton, and Gabriel Kasper were among the first to articulate the need and the rationale for CFs to step forward as community leaders. In their 2005 report, *On the Brink of New Promise*, they contend that:

Strategic positions on challenging issues, cross-sector solutions, and a relentless commitment to the betterment of communities must become as much a part of community foundation parlance and action in the future as donor services and grants management have been in the past. (p. 5)

The overarching goal of community leadership is to improve the local community’s well-being in meaningful and measurable ways. By achieving a discernible community impact, a CF becomes a more responsible steward of its philanthropic assets (Porter & Kramer, 1999; Heifetz, Kania, & Kramer, 2004). At the same time, the foundation becomes better positioned to distinguish itself from its competitors, especially the private philanthropic funds offered by local financial

institutions and national firms such as Fidelity and Vanguard (Bernholz, Fulton, & Kasper, 2005; Ballard, 2007).

The Community Foundation Leadership Team and other thought leaders in the field have actively encouraged CFs to adopt the “community leadership” paradigm (Community Foundation Leadership Team, 2007, 2008; Ballard, 2007). While many CFs have moved in this direction, the paradigm has not yet been fully embraced by the field. Although no systematic surveys have been conducted, the prevailing view among observers of the field is that fewer than half of CFs are carrying out strategies that qualify as community leadership.<sup>1</sup>

The obstacles to community leadership have been articulated by CFLT and other experienced leaders in the field (Bernholz, Fulton, & Kasper, 2005; Ballard, 2007; CFLT, 2008). One of the most important barriers is risk aversion: many CFs are uncomfortable with giving up their traditional stewardship role and getting involved in the less-certain business of community change. Even when a CF commits itself to the idea of acting as a community leader, it may not have the staff and organizational structure to support the new approach. The traditional CF is organized around donor relations, investment, grantmaking, and administration, with little to no responsibility in areas such as convening, advocacy, and capacity building. To carry out effective community-leadership work, the foundation may very well need to hire additional staff. And perhaps most vexing, the chief executive officer may not have the skill set required to do this work, especially if he or she was hired in an earlier era.<sup>2</sup>

Even if a CF develops the will and the staff to do community-leadership work, there remains the practical issue of finding the right area on which to exercise leadership. When done well, commu-

<sup>1</sup> This assessment was derived from a May 2011 conference call with nine nationally recognized leaders in the CF field.

<sup>2</sup> Recognizing that few CFs are prepared or equipped to take on the community change work that community leadership requires, groups such as CFLT, CFLeds, and Aspen Institute have developed tools to build the organizational capacity of CFs.

nity assessment is a tool that allows a foundation to identify the strategic issues where leadership work is warranted (Brown, Chaskin, Hamilton, & Richman, 2003).

This article examines one particular experiment in community assessment – the Social Capital Benchmark Survey (SCBS), which Robert Putnam organized in 2000. The survey provided 34 CFs from across the country with a quantitative assessment of the level of social capital existing within their community. Social capital refers to the social relationships and the trust that allow people, organizations, neighborhoods, and entire communities to work together in ways that advance everyone’s interests (Putnam, 2000).<sup>3</sup> By measuring social capital at both the local and national level, the survey provided each sponsoring foundation with data to better understand its community’s strengths and deficits, which in turn allowed the foundation to hone its leadership work on the “right” strategic issues.<sup>4</sup> As described below, many CFs took good advantage of what they learned through the social-capital surveys and developed proactive strategies (well beyond grantmaking) that have impacted local behavior and norms.

### The Social Capital Benchmark Survey

The seeds of the 2000 Social Capital Benchmark Survey were planted at the 1999 Fall Conference of Community Foundations in Denver. Robert Putnam delivered a keynote address highlighting the research that was published a year later in his best-selling book, *Bowling Alone*. Putnam’s talk kindled considerable interest at the confer-

ence. During follow-up workshops and online discussions, Lew Feldstein of the New Hampshire Charitable Foundation and Tom Sander of the Saguaro Seminar proposed the idea of a coordinated national survey that would assess social capital in any community where a local foundation would agree to provide funding. The premise underlying the survey was that each participating foundation would gain access to a reliable estimate of how much social capital exists within its local community. The survey would also allow an opportunity to compare each community’s results to national norms and to the other communities participating in the survey.

*By measuring social capital at both the local and national level, the survey provided each sponsoring foundation with data to better understand its community’s strengths and deficits, which in turn allowed the foundation to hone its leadership work on the “right” strategic issues.*

By early 2000, more than 30 CFs had signed on to the survey. Each agreed to contribute between \$25,000 and \$50,000 in order to have the survey conducted in a particular geographic region – a city, a county, a multicounty region, or a state, depending on the foundation’s service area. In addition to the CFs, the Northwest Area Foundation joined up with the idea of measuring social capital in the communities where it was doing place-based grantmaking (spread throughout the northwestern U.S. from Minneapolis to Seattle). Likewise, the Walter and Elise Haas Fund sponsored a survey of San Francisco residents.

A total of 34 CFs and four other funders eventually agreed to sponsor local samples in the SCBS.

<sup>3</sup> Social capital is a concept originated by sociologists and political scientists to explain how community residents overcome shared problems with collective action (Coleman, 1990; Putnam, 2000). The construct has been defined in a variety of ways in the academic literature, but all definitions include some notion of social connectedness, accompanied by the premise that communities with “stronger” connections (e.g., more trusting relationships, wider networks, denser networks, more bridging across lines of difference) are in a better position to promote the well-being of their members.

<sup>4</sup> SCBS has also proven invaluable to academic researchers. Saguaro has documented more than 200 journal articles that have been published using data from the survey, along with many doctoral dissertations (<http://www.hks.harvard.edu/saguaro/communitysurvey/index.html>).

**TABLE 1** Community Foundations and Other Sponsors Participating in the 2000 Social Capital Benchmark Survey

AREA SURVEYED	COMMUNITY FOUNDATION SPONSORS	OTHER FOUNDATION SPONSORS
Birmingham Metro, Ala.	Community Foundation of Greater Birmingham	
Phoenix Metro, Ariz.	Arizona Community Foundation	
Los Angeles County, Calif.	California Community Foundation	
San Diego County, Calif.	The San Diego Foundation	
Silicon Valley & South Bay, Calif.	Peninsula Community Foundation and Silicon Valley Community Foundation	
Boulder County, Colo.	Community Foundation of Boulder County	
Denver, Colo.	Denver Foundation and Rose Community Foundation	Piton Foundation
State of Delaware	Delaware Community Foundation	Delaware Division of State Service Centers
Atlanta Metro, Ga.	Community Foundation for Greater Atlanta	
State of Hawaii*	Hawaii Community Foundation	
Chicago Metro, Ill. and Ind.	Chicago Community Trust	
East Baton Rouge Parish, La.	Baton Rouge Area Foundation	Forum 35
Lewiston-Auburn Metro, Maine	Maine Community Foundation	
Boston, Mass.	Boston Foundation	
Detroit Metro, Mich.	Community Foundation for Southeastern Michigan	
Fremont Area, Mich.	Fremont Area Community Foundation	
Grand Rapids, Mich.	Grand Rapids Community Foundation	
Kalamazoo County, Mich.	Kalamazoo Community Foundation	
St. Paul Metro, Minn.	St. Paul Foundation	
State of Montana	Montana Community Foundation	
State of New Hampshire	New Hampshire Charitable Foundation	
Rochester Metro, N.Y.	Rochester Area Community Foundation	
Syracuse Metro, N.Y.	Central New York Community Foundation	
Charlotte Metro, N.C. and S.C.	Foundation for the Carolinas	
Greensboro, N.C.	Community Foundation of Greater Greensboro	
Winston-Salem, N.C.	Winston-Salem Foundation	
Cincinnati Metro, Oh., Ky., and Ind.	Greater Cincinnati Foundation	
Cleveland Metro, Oh.	Cleveland Foundation	

TABLE 1 *continued*

York, Pa.	York Community Foundation	
Eastern Tennessee	East Tennessee Foundation	
Houston, Tx.	Greater Houston Community Foundation	
Charleston Metro, W.Va.	Greater Kanawha Valley Foundation	
San Francisco, Calif.	N/A	Walter & Elise Haas Fund
State of Indiana	N/A	Indiana Grantmakers Alliance
Minneapolis, Minn.	N/A	Northwest Area Foundation
North Minneapolis, Minn.	N/A	Northwest Area Foundation
Bismarck, N.D.	N/A	Northwest Area Foundation
Bend, Ore.	N/A	Northwest Area Foundation
Miner County, S.D.	N/A	Northwest Area Foundation
Seattle, Wash.	N/A	Northwest Area Foundation
Yakima County, Wash.	N/A	Northwest Area Foundation

\*The 2000 survey of Hawaii was carried out by a local survey firm using in-person interviews. These data were not included in the dataset analyzed by Saguaro.

(See Table 1.) This funding allowed the survey to be conducted in 41 communities spanning every region of the country.

Results from the survey were released in a coordinated fashion in Spring 2001. The Saguaro Seminar issued an analysis of the national data and a summary of how the local communities differed from one another along 11 distinct dimensions of social capital (e.g., social trust, interracial trust, involvement in organizations, faith-based social capital, involvement in conventional politics, protest politics, volunteerism and giving). Each of the foundations that sponsored a local sample was provided with data files and summary results for its community, along with national results that could be used for comparative purposes. The Aspen Institute facilitated the sharing of information, especially with regard to the development of press releases and dissemination strategies.

### Social Capital Learning Circle

The National Social Capital Learning Circle provided for the venue for assessing the community-leadership activity that emerged in response to SCBS. The Learning Circle was formed in July 2006 to promote information sharing and coordination among foundations interested in

improving their programming in the area of social capital.

The impetus for the Learning Circle was the 2006 Social Capital Community Survey. This follow-up survey, again coordinated by Putnam and Sander, was designed to assess how social capital had changed between 2000 and 2006, a period in which a number of critical events (e.g., the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the war in Iraq, Hurricane Katrina) had affected the country's mood, behavior, and view of itself. While Putnam and Sander were interested primarily in larger national trends, they also recognized that CFs would likely want to know how social capital had changed over time in their own communities.

Nine CFs agreed to sponsor local samples in the 2006 survey: Duluth-Superior, Greensboro, Gulf Coast, Kalamazoo, Maine, New Hampshire, Rochester, San Diego, and Winston-Salem. Four additional foundations signed on to sponsor one or more local samples:

- The Kansas Health Foundation sponsored the survey in Kansas (statewide sample) and five communities across the state.
- The Northwest Area Foundation sponsored a

**TABLE 2** Foundations Participating in the Social Capital Learning Circle

Community Foundations	Sponsored SC Survey	
	2000	2006
Central New York Community Foundation (Syracuse)	X	
Community Foundation of Greater Atlanta (Georgia)	X	
Community Foundation of Greater Greensboro (North Carolina)	X	X
Community Foundation of South Wood County (Wisconsin)		
Duluth-Superior Area Foundation (Minnesota-Wisconsin)		X
Foundation for the Carolinas (North and South Carolina)	X	
Grand Rapids Community Foundation (Michigan)	X	
Gulf Coast Community Foundation (Sarasota, Florida)	X*	X
Kalamazoo Community Foundation (Michigan)	X	X
Maine Community Foundation	X	X
New Hampshire Charitable Foundation	X	X
Rochester Area Community Foundation (New York)	X	X
Winston-Salem Foundation (North Carolina)	X	X
York Foundation (Pennsylvania)	X	
Berkshire-Taconic Community Foundation (Massachusetts)		
Vermont Community Foundation		
Other Philanthropic Organizations		
Northwest Area Foundation	X	
Kansas Health Foundation		X
Staten Island Foundation		X**

\* The first SC survey sponsored by the Gulf Coast Community Foundation occurred in 2003 rather than 2000.

\*\* The 2006 survey of Staten Island was carried out by a local university rather than the main Saguaro project.

sample in Yakima, Wash.

- The Staten Island Foundation carried out a survey in the borough of Staten Island in New York City.<sup>5</sup>
- An unnamed funder, recruited by Putnam, sponsored the survey in Houston; Baton Rouge, La.; and a cluster of towns and cities in Arkansas – all of which had received evacuees from New Orleans following Hurricane Katrina.

The participating foundations recognized the importance of coordinating their efforts in analyzing the survey data and in crafting communications strategies around the results. This

<sup>5</sup> The Staten Island Foundation entered into the process too late to be included in the Saguaro project and instead contracted with a local university to carry out the social-capital survey within its target community.

led to the creation of the National Social Capital Learning Circle, which was coordinated by the author. Eleven of the 13 foundations participating in the 2006 survey joined the Learning Circle and contributed financially to its operation. (See Table 2.) As the Learning Circle began to function, eight additional CFs (including five foundations that participated in the 2000 survey but not the 2006 survey) joined the Learning Circle in order to learn what other foundations were doing to build social capital.

For the purposes of this study, the Learning Circle provided the means to learn what various CFs had done in response to the 2000 survey. Monthly conference calls were held over 18 months, from June 2006 to December 2007. These calls typically attracted representatives from 8 to 12 of the

participating foundations. Participants included CEOs, vice presidents, program officers, and communications officers. In addition to the conference calls, two in-person meetings were held in Boston. Approximately half of these calls and meetings focused on topics specific to the 2006 survey, including analytic techniques, sharing of data, interpretation of results, and coordinating the public release of the findings. The other half were dedicated to conversations about strategies that foundations had used to build social capital, as well as other issues that inform a foundation's grantmaking and leadership work (e.g., demographic trends, evaluation, logic models, risk-taking). Transcripts and other materials from these calls and meetings served as the data for the analyses reported here.

This research design allowed a delineation of the social capital programming that CFs carried out following the initial Social Capital Benchmark Survey.<sup>6</sup> These 12 foundations are not necessarily a representative sample of the larger set of 34 CFs that participated in the 2000 survey. Indeed, one can make a strong argument that the Learning Circle attracted those foundations that invested most heavily in social-capital programming following the 2000 survey. As such, the data considered here do not provide an unbiased estimate of what the typical foundation did in response to the 2000 survey, but rather a more general sense of how the survey can support social-capital programming and community leadership among CFs.

### Evidence of Community Leadership Following the Benchmark Survey

By the time they joined the Learning Circle in 2006, each of the 12 CFs that participated in the initial SCBS had carried out extensive and wide-ranging programming in the area of social capital. (See Table 3.) All 12 foundations, at a minimum, had revised their grants programs to include social capital as a priority area. Half of the foundations issued a new Request for Proposals specific to the topic of social capital.

The key question addressed by the analysis was whether the CFs participating in the 2000 survey went beyond traditional program strategies (i.e., grants programs) to carry out community-leadership work. To answer this question, each foundation's social-capital programming was categorized according to the leadership strategies outlined at the beginning of the article:

*The participating foundations recognized the importance of coordinating their efforts in analyzing the survey data and in crafting communications strategies around the results.*

1. publicizing issues that need more public and political attention;
2. drawing together various stakeholders to develop new solutions;
3. creating a new organization focused on a critical local issue;
4. developing, testing, and disseminating innovative program models;
5. advocating for changes in public policy and social norms;
6. encouraging people and organizations to adopt new practices; and
7. building the capacity of individuals, organizations, and communities.

As shown in Table 3, each of the 12 foundations in the Learning Circle carried out leadership work in at least one of these seven categories. Most of the foundations developed a comprehensive portfolio covering multiple categories, and in fact made social capital a focal point for their commu-

<sup>6</sup> Eleven of the 12 participated in the 2000 survey. The Gulf Coast Community Foundation contracted with Saguaro to conduct the benchmark survey in 2003.



**TABLE 3** Programmatic Strategies Pursued by 12 Community Foundations That Participated in the 2000 Social Capital Benchmark Survey

Strategy	Foundation												Total Foundations
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	
<b>Grantmaking</b>													
• Targeted grants program that solicits proposals focused on social capital (or dimension of social capital)	X	X		X			X			X	X	X	7
• Small-grants program for neighborhood-level social capital				X	X		X						3
• Social capital included as a priority in standard grants program			X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	10
<b>Publicize issues that need more public and political attention</b>													
• Materials describing what social capital is and why it is important	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	12
• Communicate survey findings	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	12
• Forums, briefings	X		X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	11
<b>Convene stakeholders to analyze issues and develop solutions</b>													
			X	X	X		X	X		X	X	X	8
<b>Create new organization focused on social capital</b>													
											X	X	2
<b>Develop, implement, and evaluate innovative program models</b>													
			X	X		X	X			X	X	X	7
<b>Advocacy</b>													
• Campaign to promote pro-social capital norms and attitudes					X	X	X	X	X	X			6
• Advocacy for policy that promotes social capital					X	X			X				3
<b>Encourage residents to build relationships and engage in civic life</b>													
• Materials encouraging residents to be social-capital builders			X				X		X	X	X		5
• Awards program to recognize social-capital builders											X		1
<b>Training and capacity building for social-capital builders</b>													
		X	X				X			X		X	5

**KEY TO FOUNDATIONS:**

1. Central New York Community Foundation
2. Community Foundation for Greater Atlanta
3. Community Foundation of Greater Greensboro
4. Foundation for the Carolinas
5. Grand Rapids Community Foundation
6. Gulf Coast Community Foundation
7. Kalamazoo Community Foundation
8. Maine Community Foundation
9. New Hampshire Charitable Foundation
10. Rochester Area Community Foundation
11. Winston-Salem Foundation
12. York County Community Foundation

nity change work. The following sections provide examples of programs within each of the seven categories.

### *Publicizing Issues for Public and Political Attention*

All 12 of the foundations participating in the 2000 survey devoted considerable time and resources to disseminating the findings and informing the local community on the concept of social capital and why it is important. This was done using websites, press releases, brochures, and reports. These materials typically highlighted a few specific areas (e.g., interracial trust) where the community needed to make progress. Along with these materials, the foundations held briefings with specific target audiences (e.g., business leaders, elected officials, nonprofit staff, clergy) as well as more general forums open to everyone in the community. For most foundations, the CEO played an active and visible role in communicating the importance of social capital and raising specific issues of concern that emerged from the survey.

To raise the profile of social capital even more, six of the 12 CFs in the Learning Circle organized large public meetings where Robert Putnam spoke on the topics described in *Bowling Alone*.<sup>7</sup> These meetings attracted crowds ranging from 200 to 1,200 people. The Winston-Salem Foundation brought Putnam to town twice, the second time with Lew Feldstein to discuss the book they co-authored, *Better Together*. Other prominent leaders in the social capital field, such as Vaughn Grisham of Tupelo, Miss., have also served as keynote speakers at public meetings organized by the foundations.

### *Convening*

In addition to providing education on the importance of social capital and the issues that needed addressing locally, many of the CFs used the data as an opportunity to convene groups to generate strategies for building social capital. At a minimum, this involved organizing one-time workshops or listening sessions where the survey

findings were presented, and then the group was asked to identify areas where the foundation or the larger community should seek to achieve change. At least five of the foundations (Charlotte, Greensboro, Maine, Rochester, and Winston-Salem) assembled longer-term advisory groups or task teams that developed strategies for addressing the community's most pressing social-capital issues.

*Two of the foundations went a step beyond advisory boards to create independent organizations with a mission of building social capital.*

In Charlotte, N.C., the local CF developed a community-wide initiative – “Crossroads Charlotte” – which convened local stakeholders to discuss the city's major social-capital issues. The starting point for these problem-solving sessions was a set of four alternative scenarios, ranging from a highly segregated city (“Fortress Charlotte”) to a city where residents relate directly to one another and share power (“Eye to Eye”). The scenarios were discussed by local residents at more than 70 forums held throughout the community.

### *Creating a New Organization*

Two of the foundations went a step beyond advisory boards to create independent organizations with a mission of building social capital. In 2003, the Winston-Salem Foundation convened a diverse group of community leaders – neighborhood, business, nonprofit, elected officials, clergy – to form the ECHO Council. This group has focused on building trusting relationships among one another, as well as formulating strategies to impact social capital communitywide. In 2009, the council incorporated as an independent nonprofit organization focused on building trust across lines of difference.

In southern Pennsylvania, the York Community Foundation established the Women's Giving Circle, which makes grants to local organizations

<sup>7</sup> Presentations by Putnam were also sponsored by CFs that did not participate in the Learning Circle.

that are carrying out work to increase citizen engagement in local politics and to diversify the community's leadership base. In addition, the group (technically a program of the York Community Foundation) models the building of social capital by intentionally reaching out to a diverse membership and facilitating the building of trusting relationships among members.

*The CFs in Rochester, N.Y., and Greensboro, N.C., each implemented the Mosaic Project, where community leaders were assigned to biracial or biethnic pairs and then asked to carry out conversations on a set of specific topics over a year's time. The intent was to provide each pair of participants with experiences that would allow them to develop a long-term, trusting relationship, which in turn would stimulate bridging social capital on a broader scale.*

#### *Developing Innovative Program Models*

Seven of the foundations developed and/or implemented a program to achieve progress on a particular dimension of social capital. The CFs in Rochester, N.Y., and Greensboro, N.C., each implemented the Mosaic Project, where community leaders were assigned to biracial or biethnic pairs and then asked to carry out conversations on a set of specific topics over a year's time. The intent was to provide each pair of participants with experiences that would allow them to develop a long-term, trusting relationship, which in turn would stimulate bridging social capital on a broader scale. Rochester involved more than 500

leaders in four phases of the project; Greensboro recruited 150 participants.

The York Community Foundation convened the Agape Project as a means of building connections between parishioners in two predominantly African American churches and two predominantly white churches. Over a year, the participants visited each other's churches for Sunday services, attended facilitated meetings each month to tackle "difficult issues," and met informally in each other's homes over meals.

The Gulf Coast Community Foundation, in Sarasota, Fla., developed "Bridges" to help overcome economic segregation in housing. This initiative involved the development of a mixed-income development modeled along the lines of New Urbanism.

#### *Advocacy*

Nearly half the foundations carried out advocacy work in which they called for policies or community norms that would lead to increased social capital. For example, staff at the Maine Community Foundation wrote opinion pieces for local newspapers calling for increased acceptance of Muslims and African immigrants following high-profile acts of intolerance such as the throwing of a pig's head at a local mosque. Likewise, the Grand Rapids Community Foundation took the lead in responding to a racially charged incident involving the local police department, pointing out that more open, accepting attitudes were needed to prevent the escalation of interracial mistrust. And the Gulf Coast Community Foundation took the lead in a campaign to convince transplanted residents that they should invest more resources in public education, and more generally should form stronger interpersonal connections with the community's longtime residents and the younger generation.

The clearest and most direct example of policy advocacy within the Learning Circle was the New Hampshire Charitable Foundation's work in the area of Environmental Impact Statements. Under the 1970 National Environmental Policy Act, any major construction project built with federal

funds must first be evaluated on its environmental impact. The foundation advocated for an expansion of the scope of that impact to include not only the physical environment but also the social environment, and more specifically social capital. Through legal analysis and community organizing, the foundation pressured federal agencies that were in charge of two construction projects – an interstate highway and a state prison.

### *Encouraging Individual-Level Social-Capital Building*

In addition to advocating for policies and norms, most of the foundations actively encouraged individuals and groups to take more initiative in building social capital. For example, the Rochester Area Community Foundation advocated for increased participation in electoral politics through a campaign called “New York Matters.” The New Hampshire Charitable Foundation published a pamphlet listing 100 ways that a person can build social capital (e.g., visit a nursing home, organize a citywide yard sale). This pamphlet was duplicated or adapted by a number of CFs around the country.

Community awards were also used to inspire individuals and groups to act as social-capital builders. Every year since 2001, the Winston-Salem Foundation has presented five ECHO Awards to individuals or groups “caught in the act of building social capital.” There has been a special emphasis on “unsung heroes” and on individuals and groups that have played a leadership role in building trust across lines of difference in race, ethnicity, age, and sexuality. Rather than presenting awards, the Kalamazoo Community Foundation highlighted social-capital builders through a regular feature published by the local newspaper called “Stronger Together.”

### *Capacity Building for Social-Capital Builders*

Five of the 12 foundations provided training, coaching, and/or workshops to build the capacity of individuals and groups involved in building social capital or expanding civic engagement. The Kalamazoo and Charlotte foundations provided workshops and technical assistance linked to their small-grants programs (Good Neighbors and

Front Porch, respectively). These programs specifically sought out neighborhood groups and other grassroots organizations where emerging leaders could be mobilized to build social capital on a relatively small scale. The funded groups received modest-sized grants of approximately \$1,000, along with coaching and technical assistance from foundation staff and external consultants.

*Community awards were used to inspire individuals and groups to act as social-capital builders.*

Other foundations, in Atlanta and in Greensboro and Winston-Salem, N.C., support leadership-development training that is open to all residents with the aim of expanding and diversifying the community’s leadership base. The Rochester Area Community Foundation sponsored a leadership-training program for Latino residents with an interest in politics.

### *The Role of the Benchmark Survey*

The 12 CFs that participated in the Social Capital Benchmark Survey uniformly went beyond traditional grantmaking to adopt a variety of leadership strategies – some of them quite innovative, high profile, and risky. The conversations that took place over the 18 months of the Learning Circle suggest that the survey contributed to this leadership work in important ways.

One of the clearest contributions occurred with regard to educating the community about social capital and local issues. Despite its importance to community well-being, social capital can be a difficult concept for many people to grasp – it is “softer,” and thus harder to measure than unemployment or low graduation rates. The SCBS helped make the concept more concrete and meaningful. When the results were presented in forums or published in the local newspaper, residents took notice and cared that their community was less trusting, less civically engaged, or less inclined to volunteer than an “average” commu-

nity in the United States.

In addition to raising awareness on local levels of social capital, foundations used the survey data to prompt community conversations on critical issues, including some that had long simmered under the surface. The most common example of this was interracial mistrust. Although many communities were unsurprised that the survey showed high levels of mistrust among white, African American, and Hispanic residents, the findings served as a platform for fresh conversation on race, ethnicity, disparities, and racism.

*Most of the foundations were faced with choosing from a variety of possible issues, each of which could be justified based on the survey results. In some instances, the foundation committed to one issue early on. But more often, the foundation spread its resources across multiple issues, later coming to recognize that impact requires a limited focus.*

One of the most important ways in which the survey contributed to community leadership on the part of CFs was to allow for a more informed strategic analysis. Community leadership inherently requires that the foundation focus on a small number of issues where it will invest its financial resources, staff time, and political capital. Data from the survey helped a number of foundations identify the “right” community issues on which to exercise leadership. Scott Wierman described how the survey led the Winston-Salem Foundation to focus on the topic of volunteerism:

We were horrified to realize that Greensboro was

higher in volunteerism than Winston-Salem. We just were not going to stand for that. ... Winston-Salem did not have a freestanding volunteer center and Greensboro did. We felt that that was part of the difference. When people in our community were asked on the survey, “why don’t you volunteer,” they said, “because we don’t know how to get engaged.” ... We now have a group emerging from the ECHO Council that’s going to open a new volunteer center.

Because the pattern of results differed across communities, the sponsoring foundations identified distinct priorities on which to focus, including interracial mistrust, mistrust of people in general, homogeneous social circles, lack of civic participation, concentration of civic leadership among an elite group, and lack of civility in public discourse. Once a foundation had selected an issue on which to focus, the survey results could be used to demonstrate to the larger community why that issue was important.

While the survey results helped foundations identify strategic issues, the data did not provide unambiguous guidance. Instead, most of the foundations were faced with choosing from a variety of possible issues, each of which could be justified based on the survey results. In some instances, the foundation committed to one issue early on. But more often, the foundation spread its resources across multiple issues, later coming to recognize that impact requires a limited focus. Jennifer Leonard described the Rochester Area Community Foundation’s experience with this winnowing down process:

We’ve been doing grantmaking for five years around the priorities raised in the social-capital survey in 2000, but they don’t have enough focus to result in moving the needle in any particular way. [The grantmaking] has given us a lot of insight into who’s out there and it has helped us train our community to think about the concept of social capital. . . . But we’ve ended up focusing down in a couple of areas that look like good opportunity areas. In each of those cases we have started to make larger grants and . . . raise more significant money towards these efforts so that they can be successful. We’ve started moving some needles that we’re interested in.

Leonard's comment points to one final way in which the survey was useful to CFs – monitoring progress. The foundations that repeated the social-capital survey in 2006 were motivated primarily by an interest in assessing how their scores had changed over time. When the 2006 results were made available, the participating foundations used those data to evaluate whether their leadership work was “moving the needle” (or at least contributing to improvement) on their chosen issues. As a result, most of the foundations in the Learning Circle revisited their initial programming decisions and made adjustments – either refining their strategy, adopting new strategies, or focusing on a different aspect of social capital.

In sum, the CFs in the Learning Circle described five distinct ways that the social-capital survey contributed to their community-leadership work:

1. The survey results were used to educate people throughout the community on what was working and what needed attention.
2. The results served as a point of departure for communitywide conversations to find solutions to remedy the community's social-capital deficits.
3. The data helped the foundation decide which strategic issues it should make the focus of its leadership work.
4. The survey provided a credible rationale when the foundation announced its choice of strategic issues to the larger community.
5. The follow-up survey supported an assessment of progress over time, which in turn prompted mid-course revisions in strategy.

### Was Participation in the Survey Necessary and Sufficient for Leadership?

The social-capital survey proved to be a useful tool for CFs with the capacity and predisposition for community-leadership work. However, it was not strictly a necessary condition. Some CFs that

have done highly recognized leadership work in the area of social capital launched that work without the benefit of the 2000 survey. In 2004, the Duluth-Superior Area Community Foundation (DSACF) initiated a multimode media campaign called Speak Your Peace to foster more civil public discourse throughout the region (Easterling, Sampson, & Probst, 2010). Although DSACF did not participate in the 2000 survey, the foundation did take advantage of local data gathered through the Knight Foundation's community-indicators initiative in choosing to focus on the issue of civility.<sup>8</sup> That experience stimulated its participation in the 2006 social-capital survey and Learning Circle.

*It should also be noted that participation in the 2000 survey was not a sufficient condition to promote community leadership. It is safe to assume that at least some of the foundations simply presented the results to their community and went on with their traditional business model.*

Another member of the Learning Circle, the Community Foundation of Greater South Wood County (Wisconsin), carried out its leadership work without any reliance on a community assessment. Working with the local chamber of commerce, this CF launched the Community Progress Initiative, which combined leadership development, local planning groups, philanthropic funds, communications strategies, and a variety of other strategies with the intent of creating a more inclusive, participatory culture throughout

<sup>8</sup> Although DSACF did not participate in the 2000 SCBS, the foundation invited Robert Putnam to speak at its annual meeting in 2001. That visit sparked the formation of a community dialogue that ultimately led to the Speak Your Peace initiative (Easterling, Sampson, & Probst, 2010).

the region. The impetus for this community-leadership work was not a quantitative assessment of local conditions, but rather an acute recognition that the local economy was in crisis, combined with the belief that increased civic engagement was crucial to recovery (Millesen, Strmiska, & Ahrendt, 2006).

*CFs are struggling to balance two competing approaches to leadership: leading change versus facilitating change. This contrast comes down largely to the question of how much the foundation wants to prescribe the type of community change that should occur.*

It should also be noted that participation in the 2000 survey was not a sufficient condition to promote community leadership. Of the 34 CFs that participated in the survey, some failed to carry out work that rises to the level of community leadership. The Learning Circle attracted roughly one-third of the original cohort. It is safe to assume that at least some of the remaining foundations simply presented the results to their community and went on with their traditional business model.

The larger point is that the SCBS did not lead to community leadership in an absolute sense. For a community assessment such as SCBS to lead to community leadership, the foundation needs to have a number of other conditions in place, including the will to exercise a leadership role, staff who are skilled in this line of work, credibility throughout the community, and enough discretionary grant dollars to invest in leadership strategies (CFLT, 2008). But if those conditions are in place, a community assessment can point the way for the foundation's leadership work.

### Community Foundations and Community Leadership – Revisited

This article has highlighted a number of CFs that parlayed their experience with the social-capital surveys into noteworthy leadership work. Borrowing from Ron Heifetz's language (Heifetz, Kania, & Kramer, 2004), some of the foundations have been bolder than others. The New Hampshire Charitable Foundation, the Rochester Area Community Foundation, and the Grand Rapids Community Foundation have been deliberately provocative in raising issues on the public agenda, advocating for changes in policies and social norms, and asking residents to participate in untested programs. Other foundations have adopted a softer approach, sticking with the public education and convening roles that fit more closely with the functions that CFs have traditionally performed.

In establishing themselves as community leaders, CFs are struggling to balance two competing approaches to leadership: leading change versus facilitating change. This contrast comes down largely to the question of how much the foundation wants to prescribe the type of community change that should occur. Historically, most CFs have been more comfortable with the approach of allowing the community to generate its own solutions – by offering grants to nonprofit organizations and by convening work groups with diverse community stakeholders. Increasingly, however, CFs are exercising more directive leadership and pushing for specific changes in the community's behavior, attitude, practice, and culture.

Participants in the Learning Circle reported that there is a natural progression from facilitative leadership to directive leadership. When Saguardo released the survey findings in 2001, most CFs focused on the more facilitative tasks of issuing press releases and reports, presenting the data to local groups, and hosting forums and listening sessions. As it became more clear what issues needed addressing, some of the foundations created targeted initiatives along the lines of the Mosaic Project.

At the same time that the foundations were asking themselves what they could do to improve their community's social capital, a parallel dynamic was drawing them further into a leadership role. When CFs reported the survey findings and hosted conversations around those findings, local residents inferred that the foundation was stepping forward into a leadership role. Even if the foundation believed that it was simply "presenting the data," residents saw a credible institution calling into question the status quo and inviting change. Carry Picket-Erway described how this occurred for the Kalamazoo Community Foundation:

When we started launching our social-capital initiative, we did a lot of community listening. We heard folks in the community say we are a community leader, whether we recognize that role or not. And that it's a needed presence in our community. They wanted us to step out on issues and, if need be, let go of some of our neutrality because that's what the community needed. We heard that over and over and over again.

A similar turn of events occurred for the Winston-Salem Foundation. In evaluating the foundation's social-capital programming, we conducted interviews with community leaders not directly involved in the foundation's work (Easterling & Lane, 2006). Many of these interviewees were both surprised and heartened by the foundation's willingness to publicize the survey data on interracial mistrust and social stratification. These individuals went on to suggest that the foundation now had a moral obligation to play a leadership role in addressing the issues that had led to the problems documented in the survey.

For at least some of the CFs in the Learning Circle, presenting findings from the social-capital survey contributed to the foundation's leadership work by raising the community's expectations of the foundation. Even if a foundation did not enter into the survey with the assumption of stepping into a community-leadership role, the process of collecting, analyzing, and reporting data often led the foundation in that direction.

All this suggests a natural progression as to how CFs might exercise community leadership. The first step is to create an "edge" that provokes people and organizations throughout the community to take the initiative to change the status quo. The second step is then to support strategic analysis and collaborative problem solving to find solutions. The third step is to ensure those solutions are put into practice.

In stimulating these solutions, the foundation will invariably face resistance. The level of change that the community needs may be beyond the level that the community can accept, at least for the moment. The distinct leadership niche for CFs is in raising critical questions and then helping local leaders and residents determine what can and should be done to make their community the best possible place to live.

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